FEAR

HERE ARE TALES THAT WILL USHER YOU INTO

THE HAUNT OF FEAR®

NO. 25

REPRINT EDITION

THE WITCH'S CAULDRON!

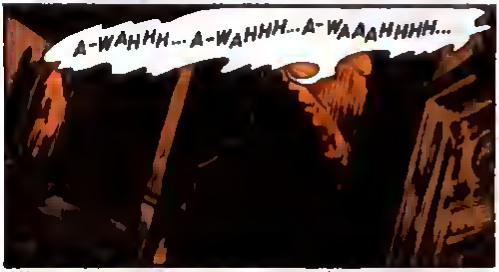
HEE, HEE! FOND FELICITATIONS, FREAKS! COME INTO *THE HAUNT OF FEAR*... THE *REVOLTING RESTAURANT* OF *REEKING RECITATIONS*, SQUAT DOWN AT THE *TERROR-TABLE* THERE, AND GET READY FOR SOME *GORY GORGINGS* OF *GRUESOME GAGGINGS*. YEP, IT'S YOUR *SHIVER-CHEF, THE OLD WITCH*, STIRRING UP HER *GRUDGY CAULDRON*, READY TO METE OUT HER *MORBID MENU*. TODAY'S TIDBITS INCLUDE *MOLDY MILK, WHIPPED SCREAM, PUTRID PABLUM, FOUL FARINA* AND *CHOPPED COD LIVERS*. ALL *BABY FOODS!* PERFECT *CHILDISH CHEW-INGS* SLOPPED PAST YOUR *GREEDY GUMS* TO WHET YOUR APPETITE FOR THE MAIN COURSE... A *DISGUSTING DISH* CALLED...

THE NEW ARRIVAL

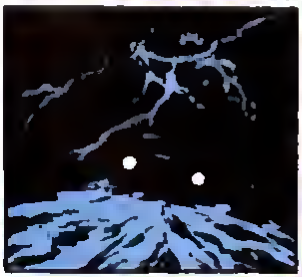
TAKE A GOOD LONG LOOK AT ME. NOT VERY PRETTY, EH? I'M JUST AN OLD, DILAPIDATED, WEATHER-BEATEN, PAINT-STARVED, ONCE-PROUD MANSION *NOW!* I'VE KNOWN BETTER DAYS.. THE DAYS WHEN I WAS BRIGHT AND NEW AND PROUD, WITH CRYSTAL WINDOWS, DRESSED UP IN FRESH CLEAN COATS OF PAINT, STANDING STATELY UPON A LUSH GREEN LAWN. BUT THOSE DAYS ARE GONE... GONE AND ALMOST FORGOTTEN. NOW, PEOPLE SHUN ME... HURRY PAST ME IN DREAD...AS IF I WERE A *HAUNTED HOUSE*...

WELL, THAT'S WHAT I *AM*... A HAUNTED HOUSE! *NOT* THE HAUNTED HOUSE OF *HORROR TRADITION*, WITH BLOOD-STAINED STAIRCASES AND REENACTMENTS OF EVIL DEEDS ECHOING DOWN MY MUSTY OLD CORRIDORS, AND GHOSTS OF LONG-DEAD OCCUPANTS FLITTING AND SWIRLING THROUGH MY EMPTY PLASTER-CRACKED ROOMS, WAILING AND CLANKING CHAINS. *NO!* I'M A *DIFFERENT* KIND OF HAUNTED HOUSE. I'M HAUNTED BY A HORRIBLE *LIVING SECRET*. THERE'S *ANOTHER* KIND OF WAILING WITHIN ME. LISTEN...

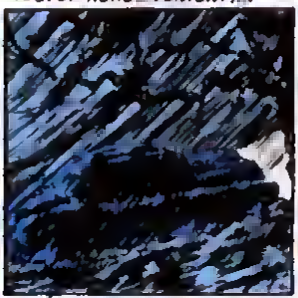
YES, THE CRIES OF A *CHILD* VIBRATE WITHIN MY ROTTING SHELL... THE SQUALLING OF A *BABY!* WHAT'S *WRONG* WITH *THAT*, YOU ASK? ISN'T THAT A PERFECTLY *NORMAL* THING FOR A BABY TO DO... *CRY? PERHAPS!* BUT *THIS* BABY IS *DYING!* IT'S DYING OF... WHAT'S *THAT?* THAT *SOUND* IN THE NIGHT... COMING *CLOSER?* IT'S THE CHURNING OF AN *AUTOMOBILE'S STRAINING ENGINE*... COMING ALONG THE OLD ROAD THAT RUNS BY ME!



WHO WOULD BE *FOOL* ENOUGH TO BE *OUT* IN THIS DISMAL NIGHT OF POURING RAIN AND LURID LIGHTNING FLASHES THAT LIFT THE CURTAIN OF DARK MOMENTARILY FROM TIME TO TIME? THERE IT *COMES*, DOWN THE UNPAVED DIRT ROAD, NOW JUST A RUTTED QUAGMIRE OF MUD...



A *CAR*, SCARCELY *DRAGGING* ITSELF THROUGH THE CLINGING SLUDGE. BUT... *NO*... NO, IT *MUSTN'T* STOP. *IT MUSTN'T*. KEEP GOING *PAST* ME! *DON'T* STOP HERE! IT WOULD BE *DANGEROUS* FOR YOU TO *STOP HERE... TONIGHT!*...



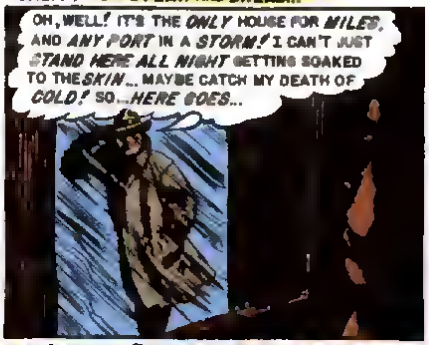
I FEEL MY ANCIENT TIMBERS GROANING AS THE WHEELS SPIN USELESSLY, SINKING DEEPER AND DEEPER INTO THE MUD. I FEEL A SHIVER RUN THROUGH MY EAVES AS THE DRIVER STEPS FROM THE STUCK CAR... CURSING.

HE STARES HOPELESSLY AT HIS MIRED AUTOMOBILE, AND THEN TURNS, SQUINTING INTO THE DARKNESS. *DON'T!* DON'T *LOOK* TOWARD *ME? PLEASE, DON'T...*

I'LL KEEP *UTTERLY SILENT* AND TRY TO *HIDE* MYSELF BEHIND THE CLOAK OF NIGHT. PERHAPS HE'LL WALK ON DOWN THE ROAD. PERHAPS HE WON'T *SEE* ME. PERHAPS... OH, *DEAR!* THAT *LIGHTNING FLASH SILHOUETTES ME* AGAINST THE FLUID SKY...

'WHAT *LUCK*', HE SAYS! THE POOR FOOL! *BAD* LUCK! NOW HE'S SLOSHING *TOWARD* ME. I'VE GOT TO *DISCOURAGE* HIM...GOT TO DRIVE HIM *AWAY*... FOR HIS *OWN* SAKE. I'LL BANG MY *SHUTTERS* CLOSED, HIDING THE *DIM LIGHT* FROM THE *NURSERY*, CONCEALING THE FACT THAT SOMEONE *LIVES* HERE. PERHAPS HE'LL BE *FRIGHTENED* THEN AT MY BROODING EMPTY UNFRIENDLY APPEARANCE AND GO *AWAY*...

HE'S *HESITATING*, SHIVERING AT MY GRIM FOREBODING AIR. I'M *WINNING*! I'M...OH, THE *IDIOT*! HE'S THINKING *LOGICALLY*...PLACING *PRACTICALITY* ABOVE *FEAR* AND *DREAD*...



HERE HE *COMES* AGAIN. WHAT CAN I DO TO *STOP* HIM? IF I COULD ONLY SCREAM A *WARNING*. IF I COULD ONLY SHOUT, "*STOP*! DON'T *COME HERE*! NOT *TONIGHT*! GO *AWAY*! DON'T ENTER MY DOOR OR YOU'RE *LOST*!" BUT ALAS, I CANNOT SCREAM. *WAIT*! I CAN *BANG MY SHUTTERS*...

IT DOESN'T *FRIGHTEN* HIM! WHAT *ELSE* CAN I DO? NOTHING BUT LET THE *WIND* WHISTLE AND SIGH MOURNFULLY THROUGH MY CHINKS AND CREVICES...

BUT *STILL* HE COMES. WHAT *ELSE*? THE *BATS*! OF *COURSE*! PEOPLE ARE *FRIGHTENED* OF BATS. *EASY* TO RATTLE MY *RAFTERS* AND CHASE A *FLOCK* FROM MY *ATTIC*...

HE'S YOUNG AND STUBBORN. NOTHING SCARES HIM OFF. HE'S INSISTANT UPON WALKING INTO THE HORROR THAT LURKS WITHIN MY MOULDERING WALLS. HE'S ALMOST TO THE PORCH NOW. AT THE RISK OF HURTING HIM, I'LL SHAKE PART OF MY ROTTING EAVES DOWN UPON HIM!...

HE JUMPS ASIDE NIMBLY. HE KEEPS COMING. ONE LAST CHANCE. THE LOOSE BOARD IN MY PORCH STEPS. THERE!...

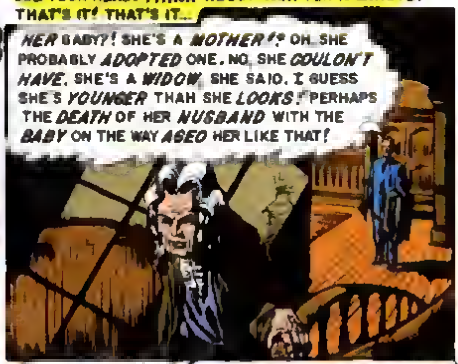
OH, HOW STUBBORN CAN HE *BE*? HE JUST PICKS HIMSELF UP AND CALLS HIMSELF 'CLUMSY'! IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE ME SLOW MY *ROOF*! HE'S *DEFIED* ALL MY ATTEMPTS TO SEND HIM FLEEING. NOW, HE'S AT MY *FRONT DOOR*... *KNOCKING*... NOT *KNOWING* HE'S BEGGING ENTRY INTO A *HIDEOUS TRAP*...

MY DOOR CREAKS OPEN ON HINGES THAT HAVE NOT TASTED OIL FOR LONG, LONG YEARS. HE'S SHOCKED AT THE FACE THAT APPEARS IN THE DOORWAY... ONE OF THOSE *YOUNG-OLD* FACES, *WRINKLED* AS IF WITH GREAT AGE, YET STAMPED WITH A KIND OF *YOUTHFULNESS*...

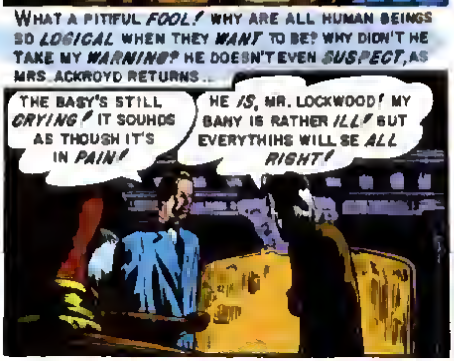
SEE HOW *EAGERLY* SHE *WELCOMES* HIM. *HE'S* TAKING IT AS A SIGN OF *HOSPITALITY!* OH, WHAT AN *IDIOT!* WELL, HE'LL *FIND OUT SOON ENOUGH*...

SUDDENLY THE MEWLING SOUNDS START... THE CRYING... COMING FROM UP THE OLD WINDING STAIRS... COMING FROM THE NURSERY...

WATCH HER CLIMB THE STAIRS, LOCKWOOD. *HER* BABY? USE YOUR HEAD! *THINK* ABOUT THAT FOR A MINUTE. THAT'S IT! THAT'S IT...



WHAT A PITIFUL *FOOL!* WHY ARE ALL HUMAN BEINGS SO *LOGICAL* WHEN THEY *WANT* TO BE? WHY DIDN'T HE TAKE MY *WARNING?* HE DOESN'T EVEN *SUSPECT*, AS MRS. ACKROYD RETURNS...



BUT THE ANGUISHED HOWLS OF THE BABY *DISTURB* YOU, DON'T THEY, LOCKWOOD? YOU FEEL *SORRY* FOR THE LITTLE TYKE... MAKE ONE MORE GALLANT OFFER...

CAN I GO *FETCH* THE DOCTOR, MRS. ACKROYD? MY *CAR* IS STUCK BUT I COULD MAKE IT ON *FOOT*! I MEAN, IF YOUR BABY'S *LIFE* IS IN DANGER...

YES, LOCKWOOD! *GO*! *RUSH* FOR A DOCTOR! *LEAVE*! *ANY* EXCUSE! *JUST DON'T COME BACK*. GO *AHEAD*! DON'T *LISTEN* TO HER...

YOU'RE SWEET TO *OFFER*, MR. LOCKWOOD, BUT IT'S *NOTHING*, REALLY! MY BABY ISN'T *THAT* SICK!

BUT THAT PITIFUL *WAILING* SO *LOUD*...

HE'S JUST *HUNGRY*! IT'S TIME FOR HIS *BOTTLE*. THIS WILL QUIET HIM...

MAY I *HELP*? MAY I *SEE* YOUR BABY, MRS...?

NO! YOU *CAN'T* SEE HIM! UH... THAT IS... YOU *MIGHT* CATCH HIS *GERMS*. NO USE RISKING YOUR *HEALTH*, MR. LOCKWOOD! YOU JUST *STAY DOWN HERE* TILL I *TAKE CARE* OF DUMPLING! I *WON'T* BE *LONG*!

ALL RIGHT, MRS. ACKROYD!

DON'T YOU THINK IT'S *ODD*, MR. LOCKWOOD? DON'T YOU *SEE*, NOW? DON'T YOU SENSE WHY EVERY MOMENT YOU *SPEND* HERE IS MARCHING YOU CLOSER AND CLOSER TO A *NIGHT-MARISH FATE*? DON'T YOU *SEE*? OF *COURSE NOT*, YOU FOOL! INSTEAD, YOU LISTEN TO THE AGE-OLD HEART-WARMING SOUNDS DRIFTING DOWN TO YOU FROM THE NURSERY DOOR... THE SOUNDS OF THE LOVING MOTHER AND HER CHILD. AND YOU *SMILE*...

MUVVER'S 'ITTLE DUMPLIN' DARLIN' IS HUNGWY... ISN'T HE? HASUM GOT NAUGHTY PAINS? MY POOR BABY! HERE'S SOME NICE WARM MILK...

CAN'T YOU HEAR MY *BEAMS* GROANING IN DISMAY, MR. LOCKWOOD? LOOK AROUND YOU! LOOK AROUND FOR A CLUE TO HER SINISTER SECRET...

OH, WELL! MOTHERS ARE *QUEER* ABOUT THEIR KIDS. *OVERLY PROTECTIVE... SHIELDING*. SHE PROBABLY FIGURED *I'M* THE ONE WITH THE *GERMS*! SHE... WHAT'S *THIS*?

AH, *THAT'S* IT! THE *FRAMED PICTURE* ON THE DUST-COVERED PIANO! PICK IT *UP*, LOCKWOOD! PICK IT UP AND READ THE *INSCRIPTION*. *STUDY IT*!

'TO MY DARLING CYNTHIA ...1917'

SEE THE *UNIFORM* ON THE MAN, MR. LOCKWOOD? RECOGNIZE IT?...

HMMM! WAY BACK FROM *WORLD WAR ONE*... A *MEMENTO* SENT BY HER *FATHER!*

NO, YOU IMBOT! *NOT* HER *FATHER!* GUESS AGAIN! THIS IS A CLUE THAT CAN SAVE YOU. MAKE THE RIGHT GUESS AND YOU'LL RUN AND RUN AS IF DEMONS WERE AT YOUR HEELS. HURRY! SHE'S COMING...

OH! YOU'VE FOUND HIS *PICTURE!* HE WAS *KILLED* GOING OVER THE TOP IN 1918!

I'M *SO* SORRY! YOU MUST HAVE BEEN JUST A *GIRL* WHEN YOUR FATHER DIED...

SHE WON'T DENY IT'S HER FATHER, MR. LOCKWOOD! SHE WOULDN'T TELL YOU THE TRUTH! NOT SHE! THAT WOULD SPOIL IT ALL FOR HER, DON'T YOU SEE THE SECRET SMILE ON HER FACE? *STOP YAWNING! WAKE UP...*

IF YOU DON'T MIND, I'D LIKE TO GO TO BED NOW!

CERTAINLY! COME! I'LL SHOW YOU YOUR ROOM!

IT'S NOT AN ELEGANT ROOM, MR. LOCKWOOD, NONE OF MINE ARE NOW. YOU UNDRESS, BLOW OUT THE CANDLE, AND SINK WITH EXHAUSTION INTO THE MUSTY OLD SOFT BED. AND YOU SLEEP. YOU SLEEP UNTIL YOU'RE AWAKENED BY...

A-WAAHHHHHHH!

A-WAAHHHHHHHHH!

THE *BABY* AGAIN...

THAT'S IT, LOCKWOOD! GET UP! PACE THE FLOOR! THAT'S IT! *THINK!*...

I *CAN'T* SLEEP WITH *THAT* GOING ON! BUT THAT CRYING IS *ODD* SOMEHOW! *NOT* JUST *PAIN!* SOMETHING *ELSE!* SOMETHING I CAN'T PUT MY *FINGER* ON!

DOES IT *COME* TO YOU NOW, LOCKWOOD? LISTEN *CAREFULLY! WHY* DOES THAT BABY'S PITIFUL MEWLING STRIKE YOU AS *DIFFERENT? WHY? WHY?...*

I KNOW! IT'S *TOO LOUD!* HOW CAN A SMALL BABY CRY SO *LOUD?*

THAT'S *IT*, LOCKWOOD. YOU'RE ON THE *RIGHT TRACK! HURRY!* DISCOVER THE *TRUTH* AND *LEAVE* MY MOULDERING TERROR-FILLED INSIDES. *RUN!* RUN FROM ME BEFORE IT'S *TOO LATE...*

I'VE GOT TO *SEE* THAT BABY! I'VE GOT TO *WHAT'S THIS?*

YES! YES! YOUR DOOR IS LOCKED. SHE LOCKED YOU IN. WHY? TO PREVENT EXACTLY THIS...

NOW I *KNOW* SOMETHING'S WRONG! SHE WANTS TO *KEEP ME* FROM TAKING A LOOK AT THAT BABY!

THAT'S IT, LOCKWOOD! PUT YOUR SHOULDER TO THE DOOR! HEAVE! I'LL HELP YOU! I'LL WARP AND BUCKLE THE ROTTED JAMB...LOOSEN MY HOLD ON THE HINGES! THERE...

NOW WE'LL *SEE* WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT!

NO ONE HEARD...NOT ABOVE THAT LOUD, LOUD CATERWAULING OF HER SICK BABY. GO ON, LOCKWOOD...DOWN THE DIM HALLWAY...TO THE NURSERY DOOR. *LOOK OUT!*...

OOPS!

PICK IT *UP*, LOCKWOOD! *LOOK* AT IT! *STRANGE*, ISN'T IT?...

A *RAG DOLL*, SEWN TOGETHER FROM *SCRAPS*! BUT *WHY* WOULD SHE MAKE ONE SO *BIG*?

LISTEN, LOCKWOOD! STAND OUTSIDE THE NURSERY DOOR AND LISTEN! HEAR IT? HEAR IT?...

IT'S SURE *LOUD*, ALL RIGHT! BUT *THEN*, OF COURSE, *ALL* SOUNDS SEEM *LOUDER AT NIGHT*...CONTRASTING AGAINST THE *STILLNESS*. *ESPECIALLY* A *BABY'S* CRY ...

NO, LOCKWOOD! *DON'T* THINK OF SILLY *EXPLANATIONS*! *DON'T* GIVE UP AND GO *BACK* NOW. *LISTEN*! LISTEN TO THE *OTHER* SOUNDS...THE SOUNDS *BESIDES* THE BABY'S SQUEALING...

WHAT'S *THAT*? THE *CLANKING OF CHAINS*! WHAT'S GOING *ON* IN THERE!

PUSH OPEN THE *DOOR*, LOCKWOOD! PUSH OPEN THE NURSERY DOOR AND *SEE*!...

OH, MY LORD... CHOKE.

YES, MR. LOCKWOOD! THAT'S HER 'BABY'! THAT'S DUMPLING! LOOK AT HIM, LOOK AT HIM AND BE SICK..
A GAGG...A GROWN MAN!
YES, LOCKWOOD! THAT PHOTO WASN'T OF HER FATHER! THAT WAS HER HUSBAND, MRS. ACKROYD IS ALMOST 70! HER "BABY" IS ALMOST 40! THE DEATH OF HER HUSBAND DURING THE WAR, LEAVING HER A WIDOW WITH AN INFANT SON, HAD UNHINGED HER MIND...
HE'S DYING! MY BABY IS DYING!
YOU!!
SHE COMES AT YOU, SAVAGELY. SHE'S JUST LIKE SHE WAS ALMOST 40 YEARS AGO, WANTING DESPERATELY TO KEEP HER INFANT FOREVER YOUNG... THE IMAGE OF HIS FATHER... WITH HER ALWAYS! SHE NEVER ALLOWED HIM TO WALK OR TALK. SHE KEPT HIM A BABY IN MIND AS HE GREW TO MANHOOD IN BODY. AND NOW, THIS NIGHT, HE IS DYING. AND YOU, YOU FOOL! YOU HAD TO BLUNDER IN. YOU HAD TO LET HER SURPRISE YOU...
...YOU HAD TO LET HER FIND YOU STARING DOWN AT HER MANACLED BABY WITH YOUR BACK TURNED TO HER. YOU HAD TO LET HER COME UP BEHIND YOU WITH THE CLUB. YOU HAD TO WATCH THE BLACKNESS CLOSE IN AS SHE STRUCK...
BUT I'LL HAVE A NEW BABY NOW!
NO! NO!
GGNNNGGGG...
AND NOW, AS THE BLACKNESS FADES, YOU CAN SEE YOUR FUTURE, LOCKWOOD...CLEARLY! YOU CAN SEE WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO GO THROUGH FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE! I WARNED YOU! I TRIED! I REALLY DID!...
OH, YOU SWEETUMS! 'ITTLE DUMPLING! MOMMY LOVE YOU! MOMMY TAKE CARE OF YOU! IZZUM SLEEPY? ROCK-A-BYE BABY, IN THE TREE TOP...WHEN THE WIND BLOWS...
AND IT'S TIME FOR ME TO BLOW, KIDDIES! THE VAULT-KEEPER AWAITS WITH A DELIGHTFUL LITTLE TALE FROM HIS COLLECTION. I'LL BE BACK LATER TO FEED YOU MORE FOUL FARE FROM MY CRUDDY CAULDRON! OH, AS FOR POOR MR. LOCKWOOD, I WOULDN'T WORRY ABOUT HIM, HE'S REALLY HAPPY NOW. SEEMS HE LOST HIS MIND! TOO MUCH HITTING THE BOTTLE, I GUESS! THE SUCKER! WELL, I GOTTA DELIVER SOME DIAPERS TO DEAR MRS. ACKROYD. SHE USES OLD SHROUDS. 'BYE!

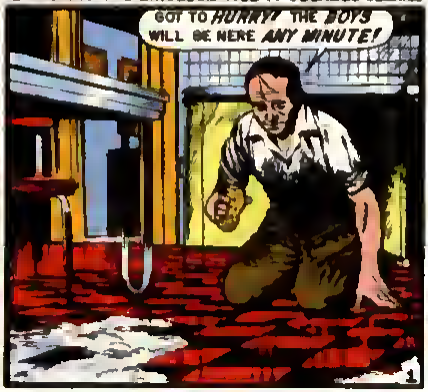
THE VAULT OF HORROR!

HEH, HEH! WELL, THIS IS THE *SECOND* OF THAT *TERRIBLE TRIO* OF *LOATHSOME LAMENTS*...THE *GHOULISH-TICS*...*SPOOKING*. THIS IS YOUR *REVOLTING RELATER* OF *RABID ROMANCES*, YOUR *VAULT-KEEPER*, READY TO REVEAL A *REGURGITATING RUBBISH-YARN*. I CALL THIS *MORBOSE MESS OF A MEMOIR*...

INDISPOSED!

HENRY GRINNED DOWN INTO THE BLOODY KITCHEN SINK AND LISTENED WITH RAPTURE AND RELIEF AS THE BRAND NEW GARBAGE DISPOSAL UNIT STOPPED GRINDING AND SUCKING AND CHATTERING AND BEGAN TO HUM SMOOTHLY. IT HAD DONE ITS JOB WELL. HENRY SIGHED WITH SATISFACTION, STOOPED OPENED THE CABINET DOORS BELOW THE SINK, AND SWITCHED THE UNIT OFF. THE SILENCE OF THE HOUSE CLOSED IN AROUND HIM. HE TURNED AND KNELT AND BEGAN SPONGING UP THE POOL OF SCARLET ON THE KITCHEN FLOOR.

HENRY WORKED SWIFTLY AND METICULOUSLY, WRINGING OUT THE BLOOD INTO THE SINK, THEN LATHERING THE LINOLEUM TILL IT GLEAMED CLEAN.



He scoured the sink carefully, rinsed out the sponge, and dried his clean wet hands on a new kitchen towel. Everything had been taken care of. There was no trace. No sign... Nothing to attest to the hideous deed he'd just committed. Henry shot a quick glance at the clock...

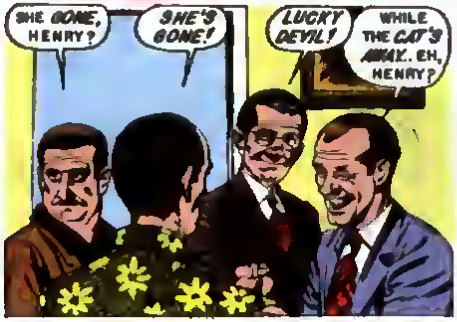
His glance fell upon the cleaver and the hack-saw and the razor-sharp kitchen knife lying on the formica sideboard, wiped clean of their participation in his foul accomplishment...

He inserted the knife in its wall-rack, hung the cleaver on its hook below and slid the hack-saw into the tool drawer...

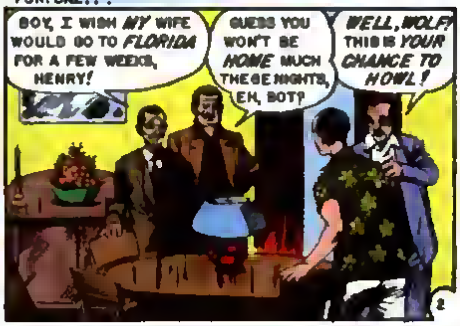
The kitchen sparkled. Henry took one last look around, satisfied that everything was perfect, and switched off the light. He moved down the hall to the bedroom, stepped out of his red-spotted overalls, removed his crimson-smeared shirt, and stuffed them into the bathroom laundry hamper...

He dressed quickly... slacks... sports shirt... the way he always liked to dress... the way Rita never let him. Down the hall, the front doorbell chimed softly...

He checked himself in the mirror, ran a comb swiftly through his thinning hair, and hurried to the door...



They moved into the living room... laughing, joking... congratulating Henry upon his good fortune...



HENRY LAUGHED GOOD-NATUREDLY, OPENING THE BAR-CONSOLE, LIFTING OUT THE GLASSES, THE WHISKEY, THE SODA...
OPEN 'EM UP, BOYS! I'LL GET THE ICE!
ATTA BOY, HENRY!
HOPE YOU GOT A GOOD SUPPLY OF CHLOROPHYLL, HENRY! IF MY OLD LADY SMELLS MY BREATH...
HENRY WENT INTO THE KITCHEN...TURNED ON THE LIGHT... LOOKED AROUND. FOR A MOMENT, HIS HEART STOPPED. THERE WAS A BLOOD SPOT IN THE SINK. HE HURRIED TO IT AND WIPED IT UP WITH A EPITTLE-DAMPENED FINGER AS SOMEBODY CAME UP BEHIND HIM...
HOW'D RITA LIKE THE GARBAGE DISPOSAL UNIT, HENRY?
OH, FINE, GEORGE! FINE!
HE WONDERED FOR A MOMENT IF GEORGE HAD SEEN. HE WONDERED IF GEORGE COULD HEAR HIS HEART BEATING SO WILDLY IN HIS CHEST. HE STEPPED TO THE REFRIGERATOR DOOR. SWUNG IT OPEN...
YOU KNOW WHAT I WOULD HAVE CHARGED AN ORDINARY CUSTOMER FOR THAT INSTALLATION, HENRY?
PLENTY, I'LL BET, GEORGE!
...AND REMOVED AN ICE-CUBE TRAY..
THREE TIMES AS MUCH, HENRY! MAYBE FOUR. YOU GOT A REAL BARGAIN!
THANKS, GEORGE! IT'S GOOD TO HAVE A PLUMBER AS A FRIEND!
GEORGE FOLLOWED HENRY OUT OF THE KITCHEN, GLANCING BACK WISTFULLY...
OH A GOOD JOB, TOO! YOU DON'T APPRECIATE THE WORK THAT GOES INTO ONE OF THOSE INSTALLATIONS... HOOKING IT UP WITH THE WASTE PIPE..
I APPRECIATE IT, GEORGE! C'MON! LET'S HAVE A DRINK
THE WHISKEY AND ICE AND SODA SEEMED TO BRING WARMTH INTO THE LIVING ROOM. HENRY BAT BACK SMILING...LISTENING TO THE IDLE CHATTER...THE LATEST JOKE... THE LAUGHTER. HENRY WAS CONTENT...
NAH-NAH!
THAT'S A GOOD ONE, BILL!
SAY, OH YOU GUYS NEAR THE ONE ABOUT THE GUY WITH THE NAGGING WIFE...
'THE GUY WITH THE NAGGING WIFE.' THAT WAS HENRY, ALL RIGHT. NOT ANYMORE, THOUGH. RITA WOULDN'T NAG HIM ANY MORE. RITA WAS DEAD. HENRY THOUGHT ABOUT RITA ..THOUGHT ABOUT THE WAY IT USED TO BE
WELL, THIS GUY HAD A REAL SHREW FOR A WIFE. ALWAYS NAGGING HIM. "MELVIN, DO THIS... MELVIN, DO THAT..."
HE MEANS, "HENRY DO THIS... HENRY DO THAT..."

YES, THAT'S THE WAY IT USED TO BE. JUST LIKE THE JOKE PHIL WAS TELLING. RITA'D BEEN A SHREW. SHE'D NAGGED AND NAGGED HENRY OVER THE YEARS... UNMERCIFULLY. HENRY REMEMBERED...
LOOK AT THAT RUG! ALL TRACKED UP! HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU TO WIPE YOUR FEET BEFORE YOU COME INSIDE...
I'M SORRY, RITA...
HE REMEMBERED HOW SHE'D MAKE HIM ACCOUNT TO HIM FOR EVERYTHING...
YOU TOOK FIVE DOLLARS FOR AN ALLOWANCE THIS WEEK! WHAT HAPPENED TO IT? GO AHEAD! TELL ME! WHAT DID YOU SPEND FIVE DOLLARS ON...
PLEASE, RITA! I DIDN'T GAMBLE IT AWAY. I DIDN'T DRINK IT! I SPENT IT.. ON CARFARE AND LUNCHES! I...I... OH, GET A PENCIL! I'LL GIVE YOU EVERY ITEM.
HE REMEMBERED HOW SHE'D MAKE HIM MISS THOSE RARE NIGHTS OUT WITH THE BOYS...
BOWLING!? OH, NO! NOT TONIGHT! I'M COOPED UP IN THIS HOUSE ALL DAY LONG! THE LEAST YOU CAN DO IS STAY HOME WITH ME IN THE EVENING!
BUT, RITA! I DON'T ASK THAT OFTEN..
HE REMEMBERED HOW SHE'D NAG...
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, "YOU'RE TIRED!" SO AM I! DO YOU THINK I PLAY GAMES WHILE YOU'RE AT THE OFFICE? YOU'LL WASH THE DISHES! I'LL WIPE!
YES, RITA!
... AND NAG...
WELL, IF YOU'D MAKE MORE MONEY, WE COULD AFFORD A CLOTHES DRYER! NOW, GO HANG THESE UP ON THE LINE!
YES, RITA...
...AND NAG...
MRS. GREEN DOWN THE BLOCK HAS A GARBAGE DISPOSAL UNIT. HER HUSBAND HAS CONSIDERATION. SO, UNTIL YOU CAN BUY ME ONE...YOU CAN TAKE OUT THE GARBAGE. HERE! AND THE CAN'S FULL UNDER THE SINK!
YES, RITA!
WHAT WAS IT THAT FIRST GAVE HENRY THE IDEA? HE TRIED TO REMEMBER. WAS IT THAT RADIO PROGRAM HE'D BEEN LISTENING TO WHEN RITA MADE HIM TURN IT OFF?...
...WITHOUT A BODY, IT'S AWFULLY DIFFICULT TO BREAK A CASE, CHIEF. BUT JENKINS MADE ONE MISTAKE. LIME TAKES A LONG TIME! WE FOUND WHAT WAS LEFT OF HER...
FOR GOD'S SAKES, TURN THAT GHOULISH THING OFF, HENRY!
YES, RITA!

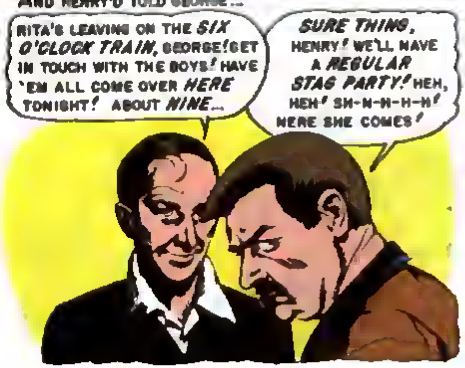
OR WAS IT RITA'S NAGGING?
NOW MRS. ELLER HAS A RARBARE DISPOSAL UNIT! SHE SAYS IT'S WONDERFUL! SHE SAYS IT GRINDS UP BONES, EVEN! SHE SAYS..
YES, RITA!
HENRY WASN'T QUITE SURE. ANYWAY, IT CAME TO HIM ONE NIGHT... JUST LIKE THAT! THE PERFECT WAY TO GET RID OF RITA. NO BODY! NO TRACE!
WELL, HENRY! LONG TIME NO SEE! HOW COME YOU AIN'T BEEN BOWLING WITH US?
OH, RITA DOESN'T LET ME, GEORGE! LISTEN! I... I WANT INFORMATION!
SO HE'D GONE TO GEORGE. GEORGE WAS A FRIEND. GEORGE WAS A PLUMBER. AND HE'D ASKED HIM...
GEORGE, HOW MUCH WOULD A GARBAGE DISPOSAL UNIT COST?
I COULD FIND OUT, HENRY! WHY? THINKING OF GIVING THE WIFE A PRESENT?
YES, GEORGE! I'M THINKING OF SURPRIRING HER!
WELL, HENRY. I'LL TELL YOU. SINCE YOU'RE MY FRIEND, I'LL DO IT CHEAP. THEY SEEM TO BE GETTING POPULAR AND I NEED THE EXPERIENCE OF INSTALLING ONE. NEVER HAD A CHANCE BEFORE...
...SO, I'LL CHARGE YOU FOR MATERIALS ONLY. LABOR IS FREE. WHATEVER IT COSTS ME, IT COSTS YOU. WE'LL BOTH BE DOING EACH OTHER A FAVOR! FAIR ENOUGH?
FAIR ENOUGH, GEORGE! THANKS! THANKS A LOT!
THEN HE'D ANNOUNCED TO HIS WIFE...
I... I THINK YOU OUGHT TO GO TO FLORIDA FOR A FEW WEEKS, RITA. YOU HAVEN'T BEEN LOOKING WELL! I'VE GOT A BONUS COMING, AND...
WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND, HENRY? YOU TRYING TO GET RID OF ME!
GET RID OF YOU, RITA?! WHY I'D BE LOST WITHOUT YOU! ABSOLUTELY LOST! I JUST THOUGHT...
I HAVE BEEN LOOKING BADLY LATELY! YES, HENRY! I THINK I WILL GO TO FLORIDA.

RITA'D ACTED EXACTLY AS HENRY HAD EXPECTED. SHE'D BLABBED TO ALL THE NEIGHBORS...

AND EARLY THIS MORNING, GEORGE'D COME WITH THE DISPOSAL UNIT. HENRY'D TIMED EVERYTHING PERFECTLY. RITA WAS BUSY PACKING...

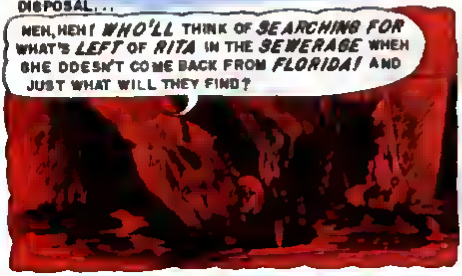
RITA'D COME INTO THE KITCHEN AND SQUEALED WITH DELIGHT...

AND HENRY'D TOLD GEORGE...



AND SO, AT 5:45 THAT EVENING, HENRY'D BACKED THE CAR OUT OF THE GARAGE AND RITA'D WAVED GOOD-BYE TO EVERYBODY AND HE'D DRIVEN HER INTO TOWN TO CATCH THE 6 P.M. TRAIN. ONLY, ON THE WAY, HE'D STOPPED, AND BEAT HER HEAD TO A BLOODY PULP...

HE'D DRIVEN BACK, TURNED INTO THE GARAGE, CLOSED THE DOORS, DRAGGED HER BODY FROM THE TRUNK, AND PROCEEDED TO DISMEMBER IT. HE'D SAWED AND HACKED AND CHOPPED IT INTO TINY PIECES AND SHOVED THEM INTO THE GROWLING, GRINDING, SUCKING GARBAGE DISPOSAL...



HENRY BLINKED, ERASING THE GORY SCENE FROM HIS MIND'S EYE. PHIL WAS FINISHING HIS JOKE AND EVERYBODY WAS LAUGHING...

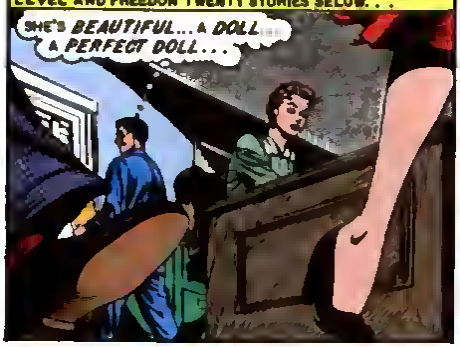
GEORGE, THE PLUMBER, LOOKED UP
YOU MEAN YOU HAVEN'T GOT TOWN WATER, HENRY?
NOPE! RITA MADE ME INSTALL OUR OWN WELL YEARS AGO. SHE SAID WE'D SAVE MONEY ON TAXES.
THEY ALL WENT INTO THE KITCHEN, LAUGHING. GEORGE LOOKED PUZZLED...
THIS IS GOT TO TASTE!
WELL WATER!
WHEN I WAS A KID...
EXCUSE ME!
GEORGE WENT DOWN INTO THE CELLAR! HENRY TURNED TO HIS GUESTS...
THE WELL IS DIRECTLY UNDER THE HOUSE! A PUMP BRINGS THE WATER UP THROUGH A PIPE IN THE CELLAR FLOOR...
...INTO A PRESSURE TANK! IT'S THE CLEAREST, FRESHEST, BEST TASTING WELL WATER YOU EVER DRANK! HEHE...
HENRY! C'MERE FOR A MINUTE, HUH?
IT WAS GEORGE. HENRY WALKED ACROSS THE KITCHEN TO THE CELLAR DOOR WHERE HE STOOD. THE OTHERS STARED AT THE FLOOR AND EAT...
HENRY! I...I FEEL TERRIBLE! I...I DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THE WELL! I...I THOUGHT THE WELL WATER INTAKE WAS THE WASTE PIPE. I ATTACHED THE GARBAGE DISPOSAL UNIT TO IT! YOU...YOU HAVEN'T USED IT YET, HAVE YOU?
WHAT?!
HENRY SPUN AROUND. THE OTHERS...PHIL...AND BILL...AND NED...WERE STARING AT THE CRIMSON LIQUID AND GROUND-UP RED FRESH-SLIME THAT OOZED IN A CONTINUOUS SICKENING STREAM FROM THE KITCHEN FAUCET...
Y-YES, GEORGE! I... I USED IT!
GOOD LORD!
CHOKE!
GAGGG...
HEH, HEH! SO HENRY...THE DRIP... POURED OUT A CONFESSION TO THE BOYS UNEXPECTEDLY, EH, KIDDIES? WELL, I MIGHT CALL THIS A 'HACK' YARN. I MIGHT EVEN SAY I HAD TO 'FAUCET'! BUT I WON'T! PUNS LIKE THAT CAN BE A 'DRAIN' ON YOUR PATIENCE! I'LL JUST SAY IT WAS A YELP-YARN WITH EVERYTHING IN IT... PLUS THE KITCHEN SINK! HEH, HEH! WELL, I'LL TURN YOU BACK TO THE OLD WITCH NOW...FOR MORE OF HER GARBAGE! AND THEN C'K WILL 'RINO' UP THE HAG. 'BYE!
7

THIS IS WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN IF RALPH HADN'T GONE

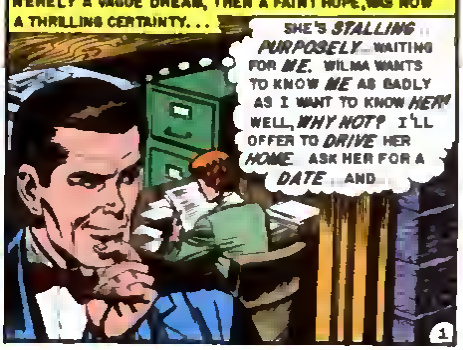
OUT COLD

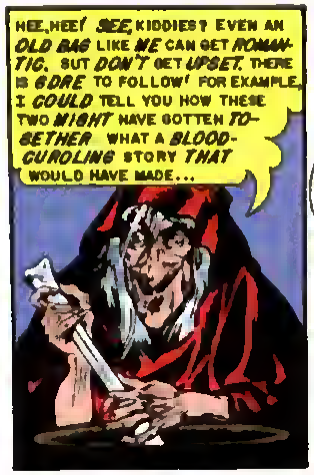
AT 5 O'CLOCK ON THE DOT, A SOFT CHIME ECHOED THROUGH THE OFFICES OF PIERCE PRODUCTS INC., ANNOUNCING TO THE RELIEVED STAFF THAT IT WAS QUITTING TIME. THE SCRATCHING OF PEN-POINTS ON LEDGERS, THE CHATTER OF TYPEWRITERS, THE CLICK-CLICK WHIRRING OF ADDING MACHINES ALL FADED AWAY. RALPH COWAN HURRIEDLY THRUST THE 'L-N' ACCOUNTS BACK INTO THEIR RESPECTIVE FOLDERS, PUSHED HIS SWIVEL CHAIR AWAY FROM HIS DESK, AND STARTED TOWARD THE FILE CABINETS. AS HE CROSSED THE OFFICE, HE KEPT LOOKING BACK AT THE NEW GIRL THEY'D JUST HIRED... THE *REVEREND*... HE'D BEEN LOOKING AT HER ALL DAY. RALPH JUST *HAD* TO TAKE HIS EYES OFF BEAUTIFUL WILMA DOONE...

HIGH HEELS CLICKED AND HEAVY SOLES THUMPED ACROSS THE KENTILE FLOOR TO THE DOORWAY, EAGER TO REACH THE ELEVATORS THAT WOULD TAKE THEM TO STREET LEVEL AND FREEDOM TWENTY STORIES BELOW...



SOON, EVERYONE IN THE OFFICE HAD LEFT... EVERYONE, THAT IS, EXCEPT WILMA AND RALPH. HIS HEART POUNDED WITH EXCITEMENT. WHAT, SINCE THAT MORNING, HAD BEEN MERELY A VAGUE DREAM, THEN A FAINT HOPE, WAS NOW A THRILLING CERTAINTY...





RALPH WOULD HAVE OFFERED WILMA A LIFT HOME IN HIS CAR. AND SHE'D HAVE ACCEPTED, NAPPILY. IN A FEW MINUTES, THEY'D HAVE BEEN CALLING EACH OTHER BY THEIR FIRST NAMES...

AND AS THEY REACHED WILMA'S TREE-SHADED STREET IN THE SUBURBS, RALPH WOULD HAVE NOTICED SEVERAL BLACK CATS PLAYING IN HIS CAR'S PATH. AND WILMA WOULD HAVE CRIED OUT TO HIM IN AN ANGRY VOICE...

HE'D HAVE BEEN IMPRESSED WITH WILMA'S LOVELY HOME, AND, HOLDING HER HAND, RALPH WOULD HAVE ESCORTED HER TO THE DOOR...

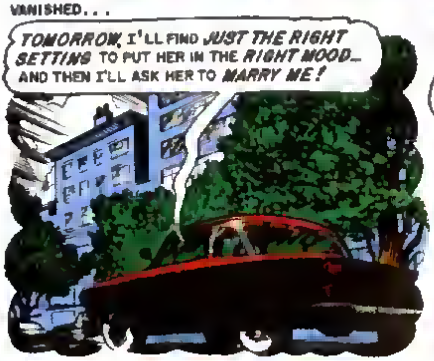
SHE'D HAVE SMILED AT HIM WARMLY AND AGREED TO GO OUT WITH HIM THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY AFTERNOON. THEY'D HAVE TAKEN A WALK THROUGH THE PARK, GONE THROUGH THE ZOO. BY THEN, HE'D HAVE BEEN FEASTING HIS EYES ON HER BEAUTIFUL FACE...HER GLORIOUS FIGURE... THE WAY THE SUNLIGHT GLEAMED ON HER SOFT, RED HAIR...

AND RALPH WOULD HAVE ADORED THE WAY WILMA'S FACE FLUSHED WITH ANGRY LOATHING AND HER GREEN EYES FLASHED THEIR HATE WHEN THEY'D DONE TO THE PANTHER'S CAGE. FOR BY THEN, HE WOULD HAVE BEEN MADLY, BLINDLY IN LOVE WITH HER...

So Ralph would have taken Wilma home...

Ralph would have driven home, his car floating like a pink cloud, carrying him to a land of happy hungry dreams. And, seeing Wilma's beautiful face in his mind, he would have been only momentarily troubled by the fleeting thought...

But, in another instant, that memory would have vanished...

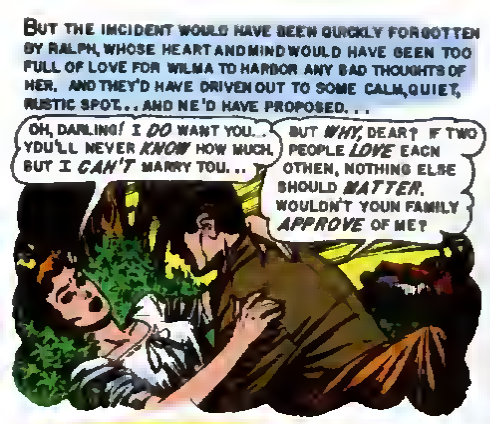


The next day would have been a wonderful one for Ralph... warm and sunny. And, except for the small, disturbing incident that would have happened when he called for Wilma...

Wilma would have forgotten and left the door slightly ajar. And the big black cat would've padded out, purring and rubbing against Ralph's legs...

And a few seconds later, Ralph's beautiful redhead would have rushed out after the cat, her eyes blazing in fury. The cat would've arched its back, spitting and baring its fangs at the sight of her...

But the incident would have been quickly forgotten by Ralph, whose heart and mind would have been too full of love for Wilma to harbor any bad thoughts of her. And they'd have driven out to some calm, quiet, rustic spot... and he'd have proposed...

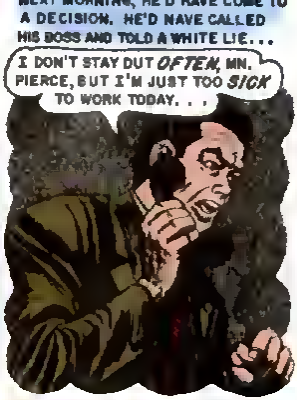


I'd... I'd like to *meet* your family, Wilma... your *father*... your *mother*. They must be *wonderful people* to have a *daughter* like you...

My father is *dead!* And my *mother*... I *hate her* with all my *heart* and *soul*... with every ounce of *strength* in my *body*... I hate her...

Ralph Cowan would have been shocked at the cold bitter malice in Wilma's voice...

Ralph would have worried about what Wilma had said, and the next morning, he'd have come to a decision. He'd have called his boss and told a white lie...

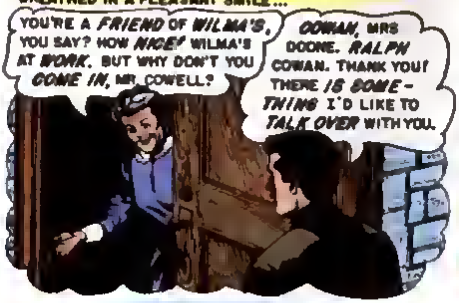


And he'd have left his apartment planning exactly what he was going to say to Wilma Doome's step-mother...

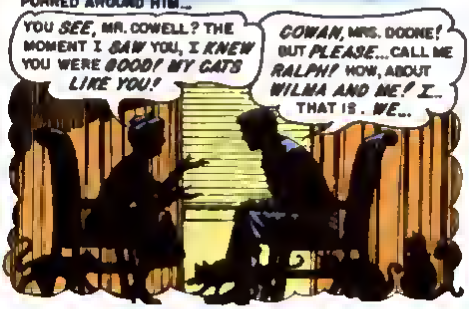
He'd have grown more and more uneasy with each block he'd passed bringing him nearer to the Doome home. And by the time he'd arrived, he'd have been shaking with nervousness...

Ralph would have forced himself to walk to the door, and he'd have pressed the doorbell with trembling hand. It would have sounded like the knell of doom to him...

MRS. DOONE WOULD HAVE LET RALPH INTO THE HOUSE, AND HE'D HAVE BEEN ASTONISHED TO SEE WHAT A SWEET LOOKING LITTLE OLD LADY SHE WAS, WITH A KINDLY LIGHT IN HER SOFT BLUE EYES, AND A WRINKLED FACE WREATHED IN A PLEASANT SMILE...



RALPH WOULD HAVE LIKED THE OLD LADY RIGHT OFF. HER MOTHERLY MANNER WOULD'VE FILLED HIM WITH THE CONFIDENCE HE NEEDED TO LAY HIS HEART BARE BEFORE HER. AND AS HE SPOKE, HER CATS WOULD HAVE COME OUT AND PURRED AROUND HIM...



HE'D HAVE TOLD HER OF HIS LOVE FOR WILMA AND HE'D HAVE BEGGED FOR AND GOTTEN HER APPROVAL. AND BEFORE LONG...

WHEN WILMA WOULD HAVE COME HOME, SHE'D HAVE SHOUTED ANGRILY AT HER STEP-MOTHER THE MOMENT SHE'D SEEN RALPH STROLLING DRUNKLY FROM HIS SECOND GLASS OF WINE...

RALPH'S BODY WOULD HAVE GRADUALLY BEGUN TO ACHE AS EVERY SINEW AND MUSCLE TIGHTENED, THEN GREW NUMB...

AND HE WOULD HAVE REALIZED THAT HE COULD NO LONGER MOVE... THAT HE WAS PARALYZED. HE WOULD BE ABLE TO DO NOTHING BUT WATCH THE MARROW-CHILLING CHANGE COME OVER MOTHER DOONE...

YES, RALPH WOULD HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO DO ANYTHING. EXCEPT LISTEN AND WATCH AS THE OLD LADY SHARPENED THE CLEAVER AND WILMA PLEADED WITH HER...
PLEASE! NOT THIS ONE! I WANTED HIM... FOR A HUSBAND! A WOMAN NEEDS A MAN... EVEN IF SHE IS A GHOUL. YOU GOT THE OTHERS! LEAVE THIS ONE. I'LL BRING THE CATS MEAT...
IT'S TOO LATE, YOU FOOL! HE KNOWS NOW! HOW COULD YOU EXPECT HIM TO LOVE YOU NOW...
HE'LL LOOK AT YOU AND HE WON'T SEE YOUR BEAUTY ANY MORE. HE'LL SEE YOU SCRATCHING AT GRAVES... DIGGING DOWN TO THE ROTTING COFFINS WITH THEIR MOLDY PUTREFACENT CORPSES... AND TEARING AT THEIR FLESH...
SHE'S RIGHT, RALPH! SHE IS! IT'S NO GOOD ANY MORE! I TRIED TO HIDE IT FROM YOU! I TRIED...
NO! NO! NO!
AND THE LAST THING RALPH WOULD HAVE REMEMBERED BEFORE HE DIED WAS THE ANXIOUS SPITTING OF THE HUNGRY CATS AND THE WHINING OF THE CLEAVER AS THE OLD LADY HACKED AT HIM AND WILMA'S VOICE LAUGHING... LAUGHING...
I HOPE HE'S AS GOOD AS THE OTHERS...
YAAAAAAAAAAHH...
THE END
AS I SAID, KIDDIES, I COULD HAVE TOLD YOU THAT STORY! BUT ACTUALLY, YOU SEE, THAT'S NOT WHAT HAPPENED! THAT'S WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED TO RALPH IF HE DIDN'T... WELL, LET'S GO BACK! YOU REMEMBER HE WAS IN THE OFFICE, ALONE WITH WILMA, WALKING TOWARD THE FILE CABINETS. AND SHE WAS STALLING, AND GIVING HIM THE EYE... INVITING HIM TO A HORRIBLE FATE...
WELL, RALPH WAS LUCKY, KIDDIES! VERY LUCKY! HE WAS SO ABSORBED IN WILMA'S EXCITING BEAUTY, HE DIDN'T LOOK WHERE HE WAS GOING...
I'LL OFFER TO DRIVE HER HOME... ASK HER FOR A DATE... AND...
OOOPS...
... MISSED THE FILE CABINETS, AND WENT OUT THE OPEN WINDOW, PLUNGING TWENTY STORIES TO THE STREET BELOW...
YAAAAAHHHHHHHH...
WHY, THE STUPID @$!!!
...TO A VERY EASY DEATH!
THE OTHER END

THE CRYPT OF TERROR

HEH,HEH! AND NOW, IT'S *WIND-UP* TIME IN *O.W.'S MORBID MAG.* AND YOUN *HOST* IN *THE CRYPT OF TERROR, THE CRYPT-KEEPER,* IS READY TO PUT A *FINAL FEEBLE FIRIS* TO THE *FESTERING FESTIVITIES* WITH A *BLOOD-CURDLING* YARN ABOUT THE *FROZER RORTH. THIS CHILLING TALE* IS CALLED...

THE LIGHT IN HIS LIFE!

THE WIND HOWLED AND SLEW ICILY AROUND THE LONE MAN ON PLODDING SNOWSHOER STRUGGLING THROUGH THE WINTRY WASTELANDS. SNOW STILL LAY IN A THICK WHITE CARPET AS FAR AS HIS ACHING, TEARING EYES COULD SEE, EVEN THOUGH THE SPRING THAWS HAD BEGUN BACK AT THE HIVES. WHEEZING... HIS BREATH FROSTING WHITELY IN A CLOUD AND TURNING TO ICE ON HIS CHEEKS... THE MAN STUMBLED ON... AND AT LAST SAW THE WELCOME LIGHT BLEAMING INTO THE GATHERING DARKNESS AHEAD... THE TRAPPEN'S CABIN... NESTLED AMONG THE TOWERING SNOW-LADEN PINES...

HE DIDN'T HAVE TO KNOCK WITH HIS NUMBED HANDS. THE DOOR OPENED BEFORE HIM AND HE LURCHED IN ON HALF-FROZEN FEET, ESCORTED BY A LAST FLURRY OF SNOW, WHIPPED IN BY THE SHRIEKING, CRUEL WIND...

AFTER A WHILE, AS THE PENETRATING WARMTH OF THE FIREPLACE STOLE THROUGH THE VISITOR'S SHIVERING BODY AND THE BLUENESS DRAINED AWAY FROM HIS LIPS, HE SPOKE...
LORD! I NEVER KNEW ALASKA WOULD BE THIS COLD! MY NAME'S NED DRAKE... JUST UP FROM THE STATES LOOKING TO SETTLE DOWN IN THESE PARTS AND TRY MY LUCK AT TRAPPING...
HOWDY, NED! WELL, I'VE BEEN TRAPPING THESE PARTS FOR QUITE A SPELL... AND I'M READY TO PULL UP STAKES AND QUIT, MYSELF...
YES, I KNOW. THEY TOLD ME BACK AT THE SETTLEMENT THAT JAKE BARROW WOULD SELL OUT HIS CABIN AND GEAR. I CAME TO MAKE TERMS AND BUY YOU OUT...
WELL, GOOD! GOOD! JUST LE'ME KNOW WHAT YOU'RE WILLIN' T' PAY! I'M READY TO START PACKIN' RIGHT AWAY...
THE TWO MEN SETTLED THE MATTER QUICKLY, AND NED DRAKE WAS SURPRISED AT THE REASONABLE TERMS. SOMEHOW, JAKE BARROW APPEARED ANXIOUS TO GO... WHICH SEEMED ODD TO NED...
PARDON MY CURIOSITY, JAKE... BUT WHY ARE YOU QUITTING? EVERYONE SAYS YOU GOT MIGHTY GOOD TRAPPING UP HERE... PLENTY OF SILVER FOX... LYNX... BEAVER... EVERYTHING!
SON, THIS A LONELY LIFE... MIGHTY LONELY! IT CAN GET ON YOUR NERVES AFTER A WHILE! YOU MARRIED?
WHY, YES! MY WIFE'S WAITING BACK AT THE SETTLEMENT! SOON AS THE THAW CLEARS THE TRAIL, I'LL BRING HER UP. MUST BE COZY HERE THROUGH THE WINTERS, SITTIN' BY THE WARM FIRE AND...
COZY, YOU SAY! LE'ME WARN YOU, SON! ALASKA'S GOT LONG, HARSH WINTERS! SOMETIMES YOU GET SNOWED IN FOR WEEKS... EVEN MONTHS...
A MAN AND HIS WIFE TRAPPED IN A LITTLE CABIN FOR SO LONG... WITH NOTHIN' T' DO BUT LOOK AT EACH OTHER... WELL... IT AIN'T SO COZY!
SPEAKING OF WIVES, JAKE... WHERE'S YOURS? THEY SAID BACK AT THE SETTLEMENT...
SHE—SHE.. WELL, SON, IT'S A LONG STORY. YOU OUGHT TO HEAR IT THOUGH. YOU MIGHT THINK TWICE ABOUT SRINSIN' A WOMAN UP HERE. AN' SINCE I CAN'T LEAVE TILL MORNIN' ANYWAY, I MIGHT AS WELL TELL IT TO YUH
THE TWO MEN SETTLED DOWN, STUFFED THEIR PIPES, AND LIT UP. CURIOSITY CONSUMED NED DRAKE AS HE WAITED FOR THE STORY TO BEGIN. JAKE'S EYES NARROWED, FIXING THEMSELVES UPON THE FLICKERING OIL LAMP ON THE TABLE. THE TRAPPER STARED MOODILY AT THE DANCING FLAME WITH A SECRET SMILE TUGGING AT HIS LIPS, BEFORE HIS VOICE ROSE ABOVE THE WIND, WAILING OUTSIDE LIKE A LOST SOUL...
HAD A BLIZZARD BACK ABOUT THE MIDDLE OF JANUARY. IT WAS A WHOPPER...

'SNOW PILED UP TO THE ROOF. WE COULDN'T EVEN OPEN THE DOOR WITH THE SNOW PRESSIN' AGAINST IT. MIRANDA AND I KNEW WE WERE SNOWED IN FOR QUITE A LONG SPELL...'

'DAY AFTER DAY, THEN, THERE WAS NUTHIN' T'DO BUT EAT AN' SLEEP AND KILL TIME. MIRANDA PLAYED SOLITAIRE MOSTLY... THAT, AND ATE...'

CHOMP... CHOMP... CHOMP...

'FUNNY HOW A SOUND LIKE MUNCHIN' CAN GET ON YOUR NERVES WHEN IT GOES ON LIKE THAT ALL THE TIME. IF IT WEREN'T FOR MY BOOKS, IT WOULD'VE PROBABLY DRIVEN ME NUTS AFTER THE FIRST WEEK. BUT I KEPT READIN' AND IGNORIN' MIRANDA'S STUFFIN' HERSELF...'

CHOMP... CHOMP... CHOMP...

'ME, I'M A GREAT READER! HAD A GOOD STOCK OF BOOKS ON HAND TOO. HER EATIN' AND MY READIN' KEPT US OUT OF EACH OTHER'S HAIR, I GUESS. BUT THE SNOW KEPT FALLIN' ...PILIN' UP... AN' WE WERE KEPT PRISONERS LONGER THAN WE EXPECTED.'

EVEN IF I *COULD DIG MY WAY OUT*, I COULDN'T *MAKE IT* TO THE *SETTLEMENT!* LOOKS LIKE WE'RE *TRAPPED* HERE ANOTHER *MONTH*, MIRANDA...

'WITH ME NOT ABLE TO GET OUT AND GET TO THE SETTLEMENT FOR SUPPLIES, IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG BEFORE I REALIZED...'

FOOD'S RUNNIN' LOW! JERKED *BEEF'S* ALL GONE. ONE CAN OF *BEANS* LEFT... A LITTLE *FLOUR*... SOME *DRIED FISH*. YOU GOTTA STOP *EATING* ALL THE TIME, MIRANDA! WE GOTTA GO ON *STRICT RATIONING*...

STOP EATING, JAKE! GO ON *RATIONING!* NO, JAKE! *PLEASE*...

'TO MIRANDA, ALWAYS A HOGGISH EATER, THE IDEA OF CONSERVING FOOD WAS THE WORST KIND OF TORTURE. SHE WAS MISERABLE FROM THEN ON AS EACH MEAL WAS REDUCED TO A BIT OF DRIED FISH, WASHED DOWN WITH SOME WEAK COFFEE...'

JAKE! FOR *GOD'S SAKE!* I'M *HUNGRY!* I'M *STARVING* TO DEATH! I CAN'T *STAND* IT...

YOU'LL JUST *HAVE* TO STAND IT, YOU FAT FOOL. WHAT'LL YOU EAT WHEN *THIS* IS GONE?

'MIRANDA POINTED TO MY OIL LAMP...'

WHAT ABOUT *THAT?*... THE *WHALE OIL* YOU BURN IN THAT *LAMP*... JUST TO *READ* SOME *STUPID BOOKS?* THAT'S *GOOD RICH FOOD*... *WHALE OIL!* AND YOU'RE *WASTING IT!*

DON'T YOU *EVER TOUCH* THAT OIL! *NEVER!* THAT'S FOR *ME*... TO *READ* BY! *UNDERSTAND?*

'MIRANDA DIDN'T UNDERSTAND, OF COURSE. SHE COULDN'T SEE THAT MY BOOKS... MY PRECIOUS READING...WAS A TREASURE THAT KEPT ME FROM GOING MAD... OCCUPYING MY MIND DURING THOSE LONG DRAGGING HOURS...DAYS...WEEKS..., ETERNITIES...'

OH, YOU WON'T *STARVE*, MIRANDA...NOT WITH ALL THAT *FAT* YOU FLOAT IN! YOU COULD PROBABLY *HIBERNATE* FOR *WEEKS*...LIKE A *BEAR*. SO *STOP* TRYING TO MAKE ME *PITY* YOU!

SO,...SOB... SO *HUNGRY!*

'TROUBLE WAS, MIRANDA HAD NOTHING TO KEEP HER MIND OCCUPIED...NOTHING BUT THE THOUGHT OF HOW HER GNAWING STOMACH CRAVED FOOD. IT WAS A DAY OR SO LATER... WHEN I WAS REFILLING THE LAMP...THAT I NOTICED...'

THAT'S FUNNY! *OIL'S SETTING LOW!* THE *LAMP* ISN'T BURNING IT UP *THAT FAST!* UNLESS,...*UNLESS*...

'I FOUGHT OFF SLEEP THAT NIGHT.. FOUGHT TO KEEP AWAKE. AND SURE ENOUGH, WHEN MIRANDA THOUGHT I WAS ASLEEP, SHE GOT UP OUT OF BED, TIPTOED TO THE WHALE-OIL KEG, AND...'

GURGLE... GURGLE...

STOP IT! STOP...

'I SPRANG AT HER IN A FURY... CURSED HER...PULLED THE KEG FROM HER FAT GREASY PAWS...'

YOU UGLY TUB OF *LARD*, DRINKING MY... MY... *IT'S EMPTY! GONE! HOW WILL I SEE, NOW? HOW WILL I READ MY BOOKS?*

YOU AND YOUR *STUPID BOOKS!* WELL MY *STOMACH* IS MORE *IMPORTANT*... TO *ME!*

'FOR A MOMENT I WANTED TO *KILL HER*. AND THEN I *REMEMBERED!* EVEN WITH THE WHALE OIL GONE, I COULD STILL READ...'

TALLOW CANDLES... MADE FROM *WHALE BLUBBER!* THEY'LL GIVE ME THE LIGHT I NEED...

CANDLE

'BY BURNING SEVERAL CANDLES AT ONCE, I OBTAINED ENOUGH LIGHT TO READ BY. AND ONCE MORE I SETTLED DOWN TO LONG, QUIET, SATISFYING HOURS OF INDULGING IN MY PRINTED PLEASURES...'

'UNTIL...ONE DAY...'

THE *CANDLES!* WHY THERE'RE ONLY A *FEW LEFT!* BUT *I DIDN'T BURN THEM!* THERE WERE *PLENTY*...OF... *MIRANDA!*

MIRANDA!

NIRANDA! DID YOU TOUCH MY CANDLES? ANSWER ME
OF COURSE NOT! LET ME GO! WH-WHAT WOULD I DO WITH THEM? MAYBE... UH...MAYBE THE RATS! SURE! THAT'S IT!
'SHE WAS LYING! COVERING UP! I KNEW IT! I TRIED TO FORCE THE TRUTH FROM HER BUT SHE KEPT DENYING IT...'
YOU FENALE SWINE! WHERE ARE MY CANDLES? ANSWER ME!
JAKE..DON'T! LET ME GO! IT'S RATS I TELL YOU! I HEARD THEM GNAWING LAST NIGHT!
'I WANTED TO STRANGLE HER BUT MY FINGERS ONLY SANK INTO FLABBY FAT FOLDS OF HER NECK, AND I DIDN'T HAVE THE STRENGTH TO PENETRATE THAT PROTECTION...'
BLOATED TUB OF LARD...
'I GAVE UP! I LET HER GO. BUT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, AS I LAY SLEEPLESS AND TROUBLED, I HEARD THE GNAWING AND MUNCHING...'
CHOMP...CHOMP... CHOMP...
WHAT'S THAT? CHEWING SOUNDS! IS IT RATS, AFTER ALL, AT MY CANDLES?
'YEAH, IT WAS A RAT, ALL RIGHT! A BIG, FAT FENALE RAT WHICH, AS I LATER LEARNED...'
...EATING MY CANDLES! YOU! YOU...
'THERE WAS ONLY ONE CANDLE LEFT. I SCREAMED AT HER.'
LEAVE IT! YOU ATE ALL THE OTHERS! DOZENS OF THEM! LEAVE ME THE LAST ONE! PLEASE! PLEASE!
I'M HUNGRY!
'SHE FOUGHT FIERCELY... LIKE A WILD ELEPHANT, SHE MANAGED TO SHOVE ME AWAY AND CRAM THE LAST CANDLE DOWN HER GREEDY GULLET...'
DIRTY, FAT, OVERSTUFFED SLOB...
CHOMP... CHOMP...
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'THEN SHE WIPED HER BLUBBERY LIPS DELIBERATELY...IN FRONT OF ME GRINNING...'
I'LL KILL YOU FOR THAT, MIRANDA! I'LL...
SO AHEAD! SHOOT! HAH,HAH! SHOOT!
'SHE LAUGHED AT ME.. MOCKED ME... KNOWING SHE WAS SAFE..'
THEN WHAT WILL YOU DO? . SIT HERE WITH MY BODY ROTTING AWAY INTO A STINKING MESS?
SHUT UP! SHUT UP, YOU... YOU.
'EVEN THE WOOD SUPPLY FOR THE FIREPLACE WAS RUNNING LOW. MY EYES TURNED BLOODSHOT AND SMARTED AND GAVE ME INTOLERABLE HEADACHES, AS I WAS FORCED TO READ BY THE DIN WAVERING FIRE-LIGHT...'
SHE CAN'T EAT WOOD, THANK HEAVENS! BUT MY EYES...LORD..
'SUDDENLY I THOUGHT OF ONE LAST WAY TO FURNISH MYSELF WITH GOOD READING LIGHT...'
THESE UNCURED FURS! I COULD SCRAPE OFF THE EXCESS ANIMAL FAT... BOIL IT DOWN.. BURN IT IN THE LAMP
'I SPENT THE WHOLE DAY CAREFULLY SCRAPING OFF EVERY SHRED OF FATTY TISSUE STILL CLINGING TO THE HIDES, HOARDING EACH KNIFE SLIVER INTO A CAN, AS IF IT WERE GOLD...'
PHEW! AWFUL SMELL! BUT I'LL BE ABLE TO READ MY BOOKS AGAIN WITHOUT GOING BLIND!
'I FELL, EXHAUSTED, INTO BED THAT NIGHT EVERY MUSCLE IN MY BODY ACHED. I WAS TIRED BUT HAPPY.'
TOMORROW, I'LL RENDER THE FAT BOIL IT DOWN IN THE IRON POT.. GOOD ANIMAL GREASE...TO BURN TO READ BY.. YAWNN
'BUT IN THE MORNING, WHEN I LOOKED INTO THE CAN THAT SHOULD HAVE HELD THE SCRAPS OF ANIMAL-FAT THAT I'D PAINFULLY COLLECTED, BIT BY BIT...'
EMPTY! EMPTY! MIRANDA! DID YOU..
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'SHE SAT THERE, GRINNING... WIPING THE LAST OF THE PLATE... LICKING HER STUBBY LITTLE GREASY FINGERS... AND MOCKING ME...'

DID I *WHAT*, JAKE? DID I *EAT* YOUR *ANIMAL-FAT SHAVINGS?* WELL, *OF COURSE*, YOU FOOL! KIND OF *RANCID*... BUT I *DIDN'T MIND!* I WAS *HUNGRY*...

'I LOOKED AT HER... AND YET I DIDN'T SEE HER. I SAW MY LAST CHANCE SLIPPING AWAY. I FELT MY EYES SMART AND TEAR EVEN IN ANTICIPATION OF READING BY FIRELIGHT AGAIN. I FELT MY HEADACHE RETURN... THROBBING... THROBBING. AND MIRANDA SWAM BEFORE ME... LIKE A BIG FAT RUBBER BALLOON, SWINGING IN THE WIND...'

JAKE? WHAT *IS IT*, JAKE?

JAKE!

JAKE BARROW PAUSED. HE SHRUGGED AND SIGHED. HE WAS STILL STARING FIXEDLY AT THE HISSING, DANCING FLAME OF THE OIL LAMP. THEN, HE WENT ON...

SO THAT'S THE *STORY*, SON! THAT'LL GIVE YOU AN *IDEA* OF WHAT AN ALASKAN WINTER CAN *DO* TO A MAN AND WIFE *SNOWBOUND TOGETHER*...

BUT... *JAKE!* YOU DIDN'T TELL ME WHAT *HAPPENED* TO MIRANDA!

JAKE LOOKED AT HIS GUEST AND SMILED...

SEND YOUR *WIFE* BACK TO *HOME*, SON! GET IN A *GOOD SUPPLY OF BOOKS!* NOTHING LIKE CUNLIN' UP WITH A *GOOD BOOK* BY AN *OIL LAMP* ON DARK WINTRY SNOWED-IN NIGHTS...

THE *OIL LAMP!* IT... I... I *THOUGHT* YOU SAID MIRANDA *DRANK UP* ALL THE WHALE OIL! AND... AND THOSE *TALLOW CANDLES*... WHERE DID YOU GET *THOSE?*

BESIDE JAKE, ON THE TABLE, THE OIL LAMP FLICKERED. JAKE GLANCED AT ITS FLAME AND BACK TO NED, AND ONCE MORE, THAT SECRET LITTLE SMILE TUGGED AT HIS MOUTH...

CHOKE...

HEH, HEH! OF COURSE, ALL YOU FIENDS HAVE *GUESSED* JAKE BARROW'S CHARMING *SECRET!* YEP, HE FINALLY GOT SO *BOILED UP* OVER HIS WIFE, *SHE* WAS BOILED UP, *PERIOD!* AND A "*FAT*" CHANCE SHE HAD, TOO! SHE *COULDN'T RUN AWAY!* THE ONLY *RUNNING* SHE DID WAS FROM THE *BIG IRON POT* INTO JAKE'S *WHALE OIL KEG!* YOU MIGHT SAY *MIRANDA* WAS *FINALLY* THE *LIGHT* IN JAKE'S LIFE! WELL, WE'LL ALL SEE YOU *NEXT* IN *MY MAD TALES FROM THE CRYPT!* 'BYE, NOW!

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